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ABSTRACT

A large body of research examines the relationships between people and their surroundings and the influence of their physical background on relationships between people living, operating, and cooperating in these environments. One of the results of this research seems to be that aesthetically significant and satisfying environments have a beneficial influence on individuals and on groups. For children's progress through school, educators everywhere create and apply curricula, textbooks, and teacher planning to further their affective and aesthetic attachment to their home region. The role of the picture book should be seen as a medium of this aspect of aesthetic education. Various nonfiction books, pseudofiction books, militantly environmental books, and books including the environment as an integral element foster children's perception of a sense of place, or a sense of the beauty and the wealth of phenomena that comprise a particular place. Good picture books can partly compensate children for the lack of sufficient contact with, and create new interest in, real environments. They can also counteract the meretricious environment: images of comics, animated films, and advertising. (DF)

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The Picture Book and Aesthetic-Environmental Education

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The Background

Men and women, individuals and societies, live in environments. Over the ages, as humanity has evolved, its relations with its environment have undergone radical changes. Horizons have widened and ever more elements and structures have appeared. As humankind grows increasingly mobile, its background becomes more complex.

Setting out from a primal state where the environment barely sustained and very much harassed man, we have reached step by step an altogether different one, where the environment serves man in various fashions. Thus, as history rolls on, society becomes increasingly responsible for the spheres it creates and maintains for its members.

Moreover, contemporary society is characterized by a far-reaching dominance of man-made environment, to a point where large sectors of natural surroundings - green spaces, recreational areas and national parks - continue to exist only by dint of socially engendered conservation. In the eyes of a majority of people living and children growing up, in contemporary technotronic society, nature is a reserve. For better or for worse the environs bear the imprint of human endeavor and aspiration.

However, apart from its manifold utilitarian functions, environments, both natural and man-made, fulfill aesthetic and ethical ones also. Philip Wagner, the noted American scientist once "Ventured the suggestion that all societies ... everywhere and throughout history have regarded some particular sort of environment as uniquely conducive to the good life, and have helped to create it" (1974). For our era this means a rich palette of desirable, versus undesirable, environments whose influence on the people living in them is assumed to be considerable.

A large and fast-growing body of research exists today, whose purpose it

is to examine the relationships between people and their surroundings, and the influence of their physical background on relationships between people living, operating, and cooperating there. For people relate to each other in spaces. Space inspires and colors behavior and interaction. Environmentalists speak of a cognitive map in everyone's mind - the sum-total of environmental elements and configurations we are aware of.

One of the results of this research seems to be that aesthetically significant and satisfying environments have a beneficial influence on individuals and on groups. Some of this has evidently been known, and applied, for a long time. However, modern developments, including industrialization, urbanization, democracy and overpopulation, have made the issue an acute one.

Paying attention to environment, authors have spoken of Aesthetic Welfare to be shared out among all strata of society, depending on the available supply of its aesthetic wealth, and of an Aesthetosphere, to be maintained on a sufficiently benevolent level.

Within this intricate framework of issues and responsibilities, I would like to focus on one issue in particular: The aesthetic and moral satisfaction people are able to derive from their home environments. It can carry great importance if circumstances allow. Mental health depends in part, so it seems, on the bond that may be created between the individual, the family, the peer group, and the place they live in - the rather confined area whose many facets are known by protracted personal experience. To live in a place signifies emotional involvement, for better or for worse. For the growing child this may also mean not only the formation of aesthetic behavior idiosyncrasies, but an influence on general attitude formation as well. A sense of attachment, of belonging, of love and of pride in the home town and

the close environment - of being rooted in this place - clearly may be part of identity development. Needless to say, the physical environment should be of a character conducive to favorable growth. Needless to emphasize, too, is that in societies as mobile as contemporaneous ones, this is both an educational issue of prime significance and one which is at the same time entangled in endless doubts and problems.

For children's progress through schools, educators everywhere create and apply curricula, textbooks and teacher planning to further their affective and aesthetic attachment to their home region, or, in an educationally more important, wider context, to foster their perception of a sense of place, i.e., a sense of the beauty and the wealth of phenomena that comprise a particular place, and also, where this is evident, its history. It is this perception and appreciation that Tuan (1974) has called Topophilia - Love of Place.

It is as a medium of this aspect of aesthetic education that I see the role of the picture book: The representation of the environment by the illustrator is an artistic interpretation. In this connection, let me briefly touch on a major issue in art - researchers into art and psychology in our time, Gombrich, Weismann, Arnheim, Kenneth Clark and others, have repeatedly stated that humanity acquires its attitudes toward nature, landscape and environment through art, and not vice versa. If this is true, the representation of these in art-for-children, in books, TV, films, etc., must be of importance: Vicarious experience creates the metaphorical and symbolic images of environment, and influences attitude formation and consciousness. "Pictures can alter and sharpen our perception of the world" (Novitz, 1977).

Picture books presenting meaningful environments proliferate, and several typical approaches to the representation of a Sense of Place can be discerned. We will demonstrate them with books originating in various countries.

Non-fiction Books

These books offer presentations of environments from an aesthetic point of view; their intention is to point out the character and the beauty of specific areas or sectors, and of the manifold activities going on in them. Usually a poetic or humorous vein prevails.

Quebèc, je t'aime, I love you (Tanobe, 1976).

This is a collection of some 20 scenes of Montreal and in rural Quebèc. The naive style is very appropriate to the depiction of the life of ordinary people, adults and children, at work and at leisure. The book's simple charm arises from the mood of joyful activity reflected in the felicitous compositions and the bright walls, cosy and nostalgic, that dominate most of the illustrations.

Good Morning, King Zygmund! (Chotomska, 1973).

This Polish book of verse contains humorous stories about Warsaw, Poland's capital, in past and present. The illustrations very effectively characterize the squares and buildings and statues of the city. Realistic views mix with fantasy: Suddenly Chopin, the great pianist and composer, appears to be standing in the middle of the town. A simple sense of pride pervades the book.

Pseudo-Fiction

An environment is depicted by way of a plot and its protagonist. However, these are actually a pretext for offering continuous sequences of images of an area through someone's eyes, thus creating a viewpoint.

This device is frequently employed for the presentation of famous cities, whose history and cultural heritage is reflected in the present. But various other subjects are treated similarly.

A Dream of Venice (Zavrel, 1977).

The teacher tells her grade students about the greatness of their unique hometown, Venice, in Italy - born, like a dream, of the sea. One day it will be covered by water again. The teacher asks the children to draw a picture of Venice underwater. In the evening Marco begins his drawing with a Siren, who - lo and behold - enters by the window and wishes to guide him. Thus the scene is set for a tour of Venice. We glide through the waters, amid fish, medusae and water lilies, and have a good bird's eye view of the famous submerged sights. Zavrel, originally a Czech artist, expresses his own admiration for the city's architecture in a very personal style, romantic and yet modern, with an uncanny flair for color. A few of the pictures turn out slightly sugary, but on the whole the mood of enchantment comes out beautifully.

Where the River Begins (Locker, 1984).

Two boys, who live where the river flows into the sea, set out on a camping trip with their grandfather. They walk upstream and uphill until they arrive at the mountain pond where the river begins. The text is concisely descriptive. The pictures - oil and alkyd paintings - are by an American artist whose first children's book this is. In a style which owes much to 19th Century Romantic traditions, he creates a series of stimulating, beautifully executed landscapes, exhibiting the vitality and dignity of nature. However, while the river's life course is the central concern, Locker also gives careful expression to the loyal relationships prevailing between

grandfather, the boys and their dog. A rare Emersonian spirit of sanity pervades the book.

Intercity (Keeping, 1977).

"Intercity" is the denomination of a European fast train service. In this unusual book by the well-known British writer-illustrator we take part in a train journey. As the train pulls out of the station it gathers speed, traverses a stretch of country and slows down at its destination. The pictures alternatively show the travellers in their compartment - characterized by their different behavior patterns - and the sights, urban and rural, industrial and pastoral, well-kept and neglected, which flash by the window. This alternation of viewpoints, oscillating between inside and outside, has a swift fascination.

For very different circumstances, the three books offer a similar basic experience: A heightened awareness of an environment acquired while one moves through it.

Militant Books

This type includes books striving to establish, or modify, basic attitudes toward the physical environment. They represent or reflect ecological ideologies, or cash in on such thinking. They intend to show the way to an improved quality of life, usually through the persona viewpoint of a protagonist. They propagate very desirable aesthetic-environmental concepts. They also exhibit vigorous and salubrious anti-establishment and anti-urban tendencies. Protagonist and plot serve to make the point.

However, there is a strong escapist mood about them, which does not encourage children to identify with efforts to improve the existing

environment, especially the urban one - which is after all where the majority of children live and will live as adults. Many of the books represent the Alternative Lifestyle. But as the renewal of the city promises a new departure, a few of these books miss the (educational) point.

The ancestor of this type is The Little House by Virginia Burton (1942), which is by now a classic masterpiece. Its strong bias toward the countryside and against life in the city was influential at the time it was published, and has been for years since.

Pony (Ruck-Pauquèt, Hauck, 1965).

This is an early, likeable German example of this type. A pony grows up in a small green patch in the middle of town. It is well cared for and has to behave politely. One day it breaks out of this artificial life and, braving the dangers of urban traffic, it attains the freedom of sunny hills and green meadows. By nightfall it reaches a farmhouse, where the farmer's son will take care of the pony. While no contact with humans is detrimental, urban existence is depicted as dismally cramped, grey and smoggy, against the pastoral openness of the countryside.

Books Including the Environment
As an Integral Element

In these books children go through experiences, and gain experience, in the specific environment they live in and also because this is where they live. The environment is not only a background but also an influence; not infrequently a forceful and even decisive one for the child's development and personality. However, the story focuses on the human protagonist, not on the environment.

Barnaby and the Rocket (Pender, 1972).

Barnaby lived on a farm in Australia. He liked the quiet, but, being a boy, he liked noises too. Cracker-night and the preparations for the blazing fireworks create a happy commotion for Barnaby and his family. The bonfire and the special rocket are pictures in vivid colors, with the flat, sleepy, lean landscape as contrast. These illustrations create a strong impression of the boy's closeness to the natural environment he grows up in.

Anton and Anne (Carigiet, 1969).

Anton, who lives in a faraway mountain village, and his cousin Anne from the big city visit each other. The famous Swiss artist succeeds in communicating, in his crisp style, the beauty of two utterly different environments and the contrast of the adventures the two children experience in either one as arising from this difference.

Discussion

This brief demonstration demands a few clarifications.

- What is it that turns the representation of an environment in illustration into a potential force? Very generally, this happens when the artist invests a measure of focal attention in this aspect of his work, elevating the surroundings to the level of constituting a sequence of interesting configurations, where things happen to the child in the book, and thus creates conditions apt to arouse focal attention in the child looking at the pictures.

- This first point should make us aware of two tendencies. We are generally inclined to the fact that in too many picture books the background barely exists at all; the illustrations create a sort of egocentric visual

frame of mind for the protagonist. Or else, the environment is sketched in as a series of perfunctory stereotypes - stage props, so to speak.

- It should be understood that we do not refer, in this context, to textbooks. Textbooks and their illustrations have clearly defined functions. As they are constructed in accordance with didactive objectives, they tend to sterotype images of environment.

- The representation of urban environments deserves special attention. Relatively few artists show the town to be a beautiful environment. The suburb, sleek and overly constructured and somewhat sterile, rarely arouses the illustrators' interests and powers. On the other hand, there is the deteriorating, amorphous urban section, where children spend their formative years. Again and again, superior artists are stimulated to redeem them. In this context, Turnips, Fish, Pancakes (Mühlenhaupt, 1972), by an important German painter, depicting Berlin as a place where children can find congenial corners to play in, is one of the best. In a number of books, E.J. Keats takes up dismal, rather questionable neighborhoods, slums in some cases, and turns them into magic places. In the eyes of the child protagonist and his/her friends, neglected buildings and streets turn into colorful configurations; the ugly is revealed, through the eyes of the illustrator, to be attractive and expressive. It is dramatized and endowed with dignity; living and growing up there is not the end of self-respect. Especially relevant for this motif among Keats' books are Whistle for Willie (1964), and Apt. 3 (1971) (see also Schwarcz, 1982).

Ben's Trumpet (Isadora, 1979) is created in a similar vein: the cheerless neighborhood is lit up and shines because of Ben's absorption in the sounds of jazz.

Artists like Keats, Isadora and Mühlenhaupt save the urban child, and the urban educator, from a sense of apathy or frustration toward the city as home environment.

We should be aware that not a few of these books, intended to radiate the character, beauty and meaningfulness of environment, err on the sweet side. Their pictures are a bit too clean, uncontaminated, nostalgic, overly optimistic.

Yet on the whole, good books of the types discussed here, especially the truly fictional ones, can become suitable partners in supporting the evolvement of a Sense of Belonging. In this age of the progressive medialization of experience, we have to choose and use media with care: These books can partly compensate children for the lack of sufficient contact with, and create new interest in, real environments. They can also counteract the meretricious environment, images of comics, animated films and advertising. I am convinced that we would be well advised to encourage awareness of the potential role these books can fulfill in aesthetic-environmental education.

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